

Wrestling Perspective

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Dusty Rhodes Getting Funky Like A Monkey In WCW

By - David Skolnick

Since his return to the helm of WCW earlier this year, Dusty Rhodes has shown signs that he may indeed be the person who can turn the fortunes of the company around. When the announcement was made in January that Rhodes would be the company's booker, following the dismissal of Ole Anderson, many fans were disappointed, not that Anderson was gone, but that Rhodes was coming back. While many hardcores called for Bill Watts, Terry Funk or Eddie Gilbert, WCW decided to give Rhodes another opportunity. Rhodes didn't exactly leave the company on good terms when he was fired two years ago and in fact, many blame him for most of the company's current problems. Admittedly, he did push himself at the expense of more talented wrestlers - though truth be known, Rhodes had it all over most everyone else in terms of charisma - he all but buried the UWF's top talent, used excessive juice and too many screw jobs. But, there were numerous problems, many of which still haven't been rectified, that also led to the NWA's downfall.

Although Rhodes pushed himself, he also pushed talented athletes as the company's top wrestlers including: the Midnight Express, Ric Flair, Barry Windham, Arn Anderson, Mike Rotunda, Steve Williams and Tully Blanchard. He also developed Lex Luger, Sting and Rick Steiner into top superstars. Unfortunately, Rhodes made major mistakes - blatantly disobeying a company directive being his last - and was removed as booker.

After a short time as one of the boys, Rhodes quit the promotion and journeyed to Florida, where the American Dream legend was born. Despite his phenomenal success there during the 1970s and early '80s, Rhodes couldn't make a go of his promotion and surprised everyone when he joined the WWF. There, he was another cartoon character accompanied by polka dots and a less than effective valet/manager. He did however enjoy some moderate success.

After Rhodes departure from the NWA, the company went through a string of unsuccessful bookers including George Scott, Flair, Jim Crockett, Ole Anderson and several committees. Each booker did have small measures of success in their own way, but none were able to attract the crowds or fan interest that Rhodes did. While it may be argued that Rhodes killed the company with screw job finishes and his failure to properly punish no-shows, the fact remains that no booker enjoyed the success Rhodes did during his peak, or for that matter his middle of the road periods. However, no booker was given more than six months to correct problems and patterns that have been destroying the business for years.

No, Rhodes is not a savior as we mentioned in the December issue. No, the company will probably never be number one, nor does it need to be. The object is to be successful and carve out a viable niche in the business. Rhodes has shown he is up to the challenge. Fans and the general public are losing interest in wrestling as can be shown by declining ratings for television programs, pay-per-view buy rate drops and decreased house show

attendance. The pressure is on to draw these people back.

The house show problem has been well detailed and there is no indication people are going to return to the arenas in the near future. Since his return, Rhodes has had his ups and downs in this area. There have been a few hot weeks with some sellouts and other weeks which were embarrassing. His Great American Bash concept, which he has successfully utilized in the past, will hopefully get people back in the stands. It traditionally was the high point of the year as far as attendance during Rhodes' earlier tenure as booker. Until the Great American Bash tour is over, it would be unfair to judge his house show attendance record.

Rhodes' first supercard effort, the Clash of Champions, had its problems. Although on paper, the matchups looked to be winners, the card was terrible and probably made several WCW officials wonder if they made the mistake of lifetime when they rehired Rhodes. Since then, he has proven their fears to be incorrect. His booking of WrestleWar was fantastic as it was a solid card from top to bottom, featuring some of the best ringwork in a long time. Suberbrawl had some problems, but the Oz fiasco and the screw job ending in the main event were not Rhodes' ideas. Nevertheless, the three main events at the card were among the best matches of the year. The recent Clash, although there was far too much for a 2 1/2 hour show, was among the best programs in recent memory. Since his return, WCW has struck a working relationship with New Japan Pro Wrestling, which must be considered a major coup for the company. The Tokyo Dome card was hailed as a success and probably saved the jobs of a few WCW officials.

Talentwise, Rhodes has brought back Nikita Koloff, Scott Hall, Billy Jack Haynes, Dick Murdoch and Dick Slater. Though none are top caliber workers, they can offer a great deal to the company including experience and loyalty - two things that are hard to come by in today's wrestling world. Rhodes has also created P.N. News, who is already a top babyface, Johnny B. Badd, who is hysterical, and he saw the potential in Steve Austin and hired him. Some characters are not going to work out, in fact, Black Blood doesn't seem to have much potential, but Rhodes at least has the foresight to know the territories are not going to produce many top wrestlers, so WCW must do it themselves.

For the hardcores, Rhodes has kept Flair World Champion and put the television strap around the waists of Arn Anderson, Bobby Eaton and now Austin. The Steiner Brothers are World Champions, Luger is the U.S. champion and the U.S. and Six Man Tag Team belts are with the Brad Armstrong-revived Freebirds. He has pushed Windham, Anderson and Brian Pillman as top contenders. While Pillman's push may seem slow, it is very similar to Windham's push in Florida during the early 80s. Look at what it did for Windham. Also, Sting's ring work has improved during the past few months and one has to respect Rhodes for telling Sting he was going to do the job at Superbrawl and having Sting agree to it. Unlike Ole Anderson, Rhodes is not bringing in green wrestlers like the Motor City Madman, the Nightstalker and J.W. Storm. Instead, he is developing wrestlers that have a chance to succeed in the company such as Curtis Hughes and El Gigante.

One wrestler that bears discussion is Rhodes' son, Dustin. Yes, Rhodes is pushing his son too hard, but Dustin is a talented wrestler who has received great crowd reactions. While Rhodes should tone down the push somewhat and not make his son invincible, Dustin does deserve a solid push and one day, he will be a main event caliber wrestler; regardless of his genealogical tree.

As far as Rhodes' appearances on television, he has had his ups and downs. His first Clash appearance was embarrassing. He was obviously nervous and made a fool out of himself. Since then, however, he has done a credible job announcing the last two PPVs. His Bull Drop Inn segments were very entertaining, despite Jason Hervey and he should be given an award for the job he did calling the Japanese women's match at WrestleWar. He added humor to a match with little fan interest. No one could expect a man who can't

pronounce "business" to attempt the female wrestlers' names. Not every fan looks at wrestling as seriously as some and a little humor only adds to the overall package. Unfortunately, Rhodes has been taken off the airwaves and this may indicate WCW's typical "you have five months make the company millions or you're gone" philosophy may be taking root again. This would be a mistake as Rhodes has not been given enough time to correct the problems left for him by Ole Anderson and several other booking regimes.

Much has been written about Rhodes staging a comeback tour. I, for one, hope he does come back for a short return. The comeback would pop houses since people would want to see the American Dream for the last time. What would probably draw big money would be for Dustin to turn heel and join forces with his father's old allies such as Koloff, Windham and Murdoch. Perhaps the new Superpowers or the new Texas Outlaws. Then it would be up to Rhodes to straighten out his son. Perhaps during a "Funky Like a Monkey Retirement Tour 1991." Then from time to time, Rhodes could come out of retirement a la Watts and take care of some mid-level "bidnezz."

Of course Rhodes is not responsible for every good thing that has happened since his return, just as he is not responsible for every problem. However, WCW has taken several positive steps since he was rehired. For the first time since he left the company in early 1989, WCW has some direction. There are feuds that fans, even casual ones, can follow. The television has improved tenfold since his return even though ratings have been down. Some fans will never like Rhodes, regardless of what he does; that isn't the issue. Rhodes has accomplished a great deal since his return and is on his way to repairing many of the problems that exist in the problem-laden company. The "Rhodes" to success are often bumpy and there will be numerous pitfalls, but if given the proper chance, the Dream can make the company successful. For once, the company seems to be making progress, now it is up to WCW to make sure they do not thwart it.

Sidelines

Thanks To Wade Keller, Mike Gunderloy and Rodney Leighton for the plugs, as always, we appreciate the support.

Mat Marketplace is an excellent bimonthly publication put out by Sheldon Goldberg. It includes a thorough classified listing of available wrestling merchandise including newsletters, T-Shirts, old wrestling games and much more. It also features excellent nostalgic the wrestling and wrestling memorabilia. The first four issues have shown great promise and it is definitely worth a look. \$2.00 per issue from Sheldon Goldberg, PO Box 2371, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130.

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Rating The Hack

By - The Phantom Of The Ring

There have been many overrated champions in the history of professional wrestling, but none stands out more than George Hackenschmidt. He was ranked by ring experts such as Nat Flesicher and even Dan Parker as one of the five best wrestlers in history, but the odd thing about this is the writers who ranked him never saw him wrestle. There is neither extensive literature or even eyewitness reports of his exploits. In fact the only extensive reports on Hackenschmidt concerned his two losses to Frank Gotch and, as will be shown later, both losses were highly suspect. What we have is a man seemingly rated as one of the greats not on the basis of his prowess, but on the basis of his defeats.

Hackenschmidt is also a wrestler with particular relevance for these times as he was the first champion put over, not on the basis of ability, but rather on the basis of physique and drawing power. He was a devotee of physical culture, which was sweeping the European continent during the 1890s. This was the precursor of today's bodybuilding industry. The main difference being that the physical culture movement was combined with a form of spiritualism (inspired by British Hegelian John Ellis McTaggart, an inspiration to Shirley McLaine) to provide a total guide for living. Hackenschmidt was educated by any standards: he spoke seven languages, was a friend of British philosopher G. E. Moore and authored several books on physical culture and spiritualism.

As to his wrestling skills, Hackenschmidt was supposedly a championship Greco-Roman amateur wrestler, though there is no actual record of this, just the testimony of many writers. At the height of his powers, Hackenschmidt was 5'10" and 210 lbs., having developed his muscular frame through weightlifting and maintaining it via participation in physical culture contests. He, along with Eugene Sandow (who also became a wrestler, but without the same results), dominated the sport before turning to professional wrestling.

Professional wrestling was also enjoying a vogue of sorts in Europe, and Hackenschmidt turned pro in 1900. His immense popularity among sports fans turned into a box office bonanza. He began his career by touring the capitals of Europe and winning each wrestling tournament held there (professional wrestling then, as now in Europe was held in a tournament format). Billed as "The Russian Lion" and known to sportswriters and fans alike as simply "Hack," he did not lose or draw a single match until 1908. His charisma made him the leading drawing card in Europe and he averaged around \$75,000 per year in fees alone.

Invited to America in 1905, Hackenschmidt proved to be just as much a curiosity here, although his reputation was not as strong. He went back to Europe later that year in possession of a version of the World Championship which he won from former West Pointer Tom Jenkins. Hackenschmidt then went on to defend that belt against the likes of Paul Pons, George Steadman and others. Interestingly, he avoided Stan and Waldek Zbyszko like the plague.

Although Hackenschmidt's victory total was impressive, his method in winning his matches was not. His 1906 title defense in London was critiqued by the Times as "unimpressive" and "not up to the reputation he garnered on the continent." The Parisian

newspapers had trouble with Hackenschmidt defeating the likes of Pons, who was the national wrestling symbol of France during this era, not only once, but several times. They even began to wonder if the matches were on the up-and-up. Of course they weren't, for if Hackenschmidt were to lose, much of his drawing power would evaporate overnight and the promoters weren't about to kill the proverbial goose that laid the golden egg.

Riding the crest of the wrestling world, Hackenschmidt made a fatal mistake. Allowing his ego to get the better of him, and falling into the trap of actually believing his image, he accepted a match for "the undisputed world's title" against American Frank Gotch. In a further departure from common sense, Hackenschmidt agreed to wrestle Gotch at Dexter Park Pavilion, Chicago, which was practically Gotch's backyard. He went into the match as a 5 to 2 favorite. He came out a loser.

The match was a dull affair, even by 1908 standards. For most of the first fall, the two bulled each other around, doing more resting than wrestling. Gotch finally captured the fall with his famous toehold after two hours and eleven minutes. At the end of the rest period, Hackenschmidt suddenly signalled that he had had enough, almost like Roberto Duran telling the referee "no mas." The curious thing about this was there was never any reason given for quitting. He first claimed exhaustion, then injury suffered from Gotch's toehold. No matter, it still went down in the record books as a defeat, though Hackenschmidt still continued to be billed as the champion on the continent.

From the safety of Europe, Hackenschmidt let loose with a barrage of sour grapes. He claimed that Gotch's body was so heavily oiled that it was impossible to get a decent hold. The oil had gotten into Hackenschmidt's nose and eyes causing so much discomfort that he was forced to retire after the first fall. Gotch denied this vociferously, calling Hackenschmidt a "crybaby" and challenging him to a rematch. From what I've been able to cull from eyewitness reports, it seems that Hackenschmidt was to lose to Gotch, but balked midway through the match, settling instead for the more face saving injury retirement. His purse for the match was more than the popular Gotch received, and may have been to insure a loss. Whatever the reasons, Hackenschmidt's shining cost him crowd appeal and money, so much so that he agreed to a rematch with Gotch in 1911 at the same venue.

This time, the match was even more decisive. Hackenschmidt claimed that a leg injury suffered in training left him vulnerable to Gotch's toehold and enabled Gotch to score two straight falls in a total time of under an hour; a fast paced match for those days. Hackenschmidt once again had an ego saving excuse, but it cost him again in the pocketbook. The onset of World War I gave Hackenschmidt the excuse to end his rapidly declining career and he retired to England, where he became fitness instructor to the House of Lords, where he would remain until his retirement in the mid-50s. Hackenschmidt passed away in 1969, a legend certainly in his own mind, but also in the minds of those who only knew him by a supposed reputation. To this day, he remains an enigma in a game loaded with enigmas.

The Non-Fans' Perception of Wrestling

By - Vic Stanley

We long suffering wrestling fans are accustomed to having ridicule and abuse heaped upon us by the non-fans. Our sport of choice has driven many of us underground in order to avoid the condescending attitudes of others. Meanwhile those of us proud and defiant enough to openly proclaim our love for the sport must frequently suffer the consequences.

The typical adult wrestling fan is perceived by the outside world to be either a simpleminded hillbilly or an undereducated urban lowlife. In the very least, we are thought of as possessing questionable taste and judgement, since everybody knows wrestling is a work. Indeed, wrestling has always been viewed as a blue collar diversion, as were most sports until the management of these collective industries priced baseball, football basketball and hockey out of the reach of the common man. It is probably true that not many wrestling fans also attend the opera or ballet, but the same can be said for the fans of most other sports. Since the middle class comprises the largest segment of the overall population, it stands to reason that most wrestling fans are middle class.

The concept of avidly following an obviously worked sport is one which the non-fans seem unable to comprehend. In actuality, the percentage of adult wrestling fans who really believe what they see in the ring is very small. The rest of us simply enjoy it as flamboyant entertainment or even a form of performance art. It provides a diversion from the drudgery of everyday life. It is a liberating form of escapism, that, while requiring some suspension of reality to enjoy its spirit, is capable of lifting our emotions after a particularly bad day. The fact that it is staged, choreographed and pre-determined is the aspect of wrestling which breeds the most disdain from fans of "real" sports. Meanwhile, I have attended some Chicago Cubs games which I could not consider a sport of any type. Does bad sport offer more entertainment value than and an exciting non-sport like wrestling? Are we wrestling fans dumb because we got our money's worth while real sports fans suffer through boring games featuring unmotivated, complacent and overpaid athletes?

I often wonder if these very same people who chastise wrestling fans, enter movie theaters with the preconception that everything they are about to view on the screen is real. If they know it is not, how can they possibly enjoy it? Don't they realize that movies aren't real? Why root for Rambo annihilating 10,000 communists if they are actually only movie extras who pick themselves up, brush themselves off and enjoy a buffet lunch shortly after being shot to pieces? Many of the people who ridicule wrestling fans are also the theater patrons who leave the Rambo movie saying, "Man, that was great!" and proceed to make machine gun noises as they walk back to their cars. In order to enjoy a movie, the viewing audience must suspend their sense of reality - just like a wrestling fan. Film producers don't want the moviegoer to think, "This isn't real." This is only a fake movie. It would be foolish to enjoy this." Arnold Schwarzenegger playing the character of the Terminator is no different than Terry Bollea playing Hulk Hogan. Many will argue that wrestling attempts to portray their performers in real situations, but to think that most wrestling devotees really believe this merely indicates naivete on the part of the non-fan.

People who despise the false pomp and circumstance of wrestling adore soap operas for the very same reasons. In soap operas, like wrestling, reality is a premise which is exaggerated or forsaken altogether for the sake of a sensational extended plotline. To watch a grown adult totally enthralled by the false profundity of a soap opera is a scary unsettling experience. They speak of characters as if they were real people, and at times, their fervor approaches fanaticism. Soap stars are subject to many more physical attacks by hysterical fans than are wrestlers. These fans actually believe the actors and the characters are one in the same, to an even greater extent than the wrestling fans confuse their stars. Soap opera magazines have much greater circulations than wrestling magazines. Although the soaps are considered to be mainstream entertainment while wrestling is on the fringe of general acceptance, the analogy frequently made between wrestling and the soaps is a sound one. Non-fans will suspend reality for soap operas, ballet and even opera, but are unable to make this concession for wrestling. Why the inconsistency?

In the music industry, everybody from Madonna to Paula Abdul to New Kids on the Block to Milli Vanilli have misrepresented themselves as actual singers. While they are gyrating aerobically on stage, their voices are being generated or supplemented from tape recorders behind the curtain like a high tech Wizard of Oz. Even in the wake of documented public disclosures that these performers are not delivering what they are advertising, the concerts are still sellouts. Is the music industry more credible than the wrestling industry? Are

music fans smarter than wrestling fans? Admittedly, Madonna does possess some perverse charm which I do not understand; but millions of other people see something in her that escapes me. These are the same people who cannot comprehend the appeal of Hulk Hogan.

The point is that there is basically no difference between Rambo, Hulk Hogan and Madonna, at least not to intelligent people. These characters are all contrived, but depending on personal taste, they can all be entertaining. If I sound condescending toward non-fans, perhaps it is time somebody fought back. It is the hypocritical overtones in their smug lambasting of wrestling which I find the most unpalatable. Meanwhile, they willingly continue to make multi-millionaires out of pre-fabricated non-talents.

Perhaps the problem with wrestling these days is that it has gotten too big for its own good. It flourished and was at its creative peak when it was perceived as a hardcore sport. It gained borderline mainstream acceptance in the 80s due to the frivolous, expendable income crowd, who were frequenting Wrestlemanias for all the wrong reasons. Now that the yuppie faction of wrestling fandom has apparently forsaken it for other monetary distractions, the industry seems to be in a recession of sorts. But perhaps it was never meant for mass consumption and is now merely seeking its own level, without the assistance of fly by night fans and those who attend merely to laugh at the wrestlers and the fans. The true fans shouldn't care what the non-fans think of their beloved sport. I know I don't.

Ric Flair: A Time To Reflect

By - Paul J. MacArthur

For the past 10 years, the dominate name in the wrestling world has been Ric Flair. Lauded by many as the best in the game during the 80s, and perhaps the greatest of all time, Flair consistently elevated wrestling during his reigns as NWA World Champion. His matches with Ricky Steamboat will not be surpassed in the near future. He wrestled classics with Barry Windham, Terry Funk, Ted DiBiase, Sting, Magnum T.A., Lex Luger, Ricky Morton, Roddy Piper, Kerry Von Erich, Harley Race and countless others. He carried opponents lacking ability to four star matches time and time again. A master of deception, he gave the illusion that Nikita Koloff, Billy Jack Haynes and an early Lex Luger were great wrestlers capable of winning the title if just given a fair chance with the champion. Solid wrestling, great bumps, spectacular yet believable brawling, those braggadocios and captivating interviews, unparalleled ring psychology, that chop and the charisma that made the crowd know the moment he "walked that aisle" they were going to see something special, all played a part in making Flair the wrestler of the decade and possibly of all time. At his peak, there were maybe one or two wrestlers in his class. At his worst, there were five or six. Justifiably proud and universally respected, the past decade was the Ric Flair decade and the times were great. Times, however, and regrettably so, change.

In 1991, Flair began his seventh reign as NWA/WCW World Champion. Without the locks that were part of his trademark for so many years, Flair just didn't look the same. He was still the best, but something looked wrong. His match with Scott Steiner at the Clash was a disappointment, but everyone has an off night. His rematches with Sting were good, but it was the same opponent he'd been wrestling on and off since 1988. He was thrown into matches with El Gigante where he made the giant look good, but that was old hat. Flair had always been able to make a wrestler with minimal talent look like a world beater. His matches with Tatsumi Fujinami were good, but the chemistry just didn't seem right. He looked great with Brian Pillman, but the match wasn't anything special. Flair still wrestles a better match than anyone in the U.S., but something has just seemed wrong since he regained the strap in January. The question is what's wrong? Is it Flair, his

surroundings or a combination of the two?

Flair's recent lackluster performances - and these are by Flair's standards which are significantly higher than most every other wrestler in the business - can be traced back to August 1989. It was at this time, Flair was made booker for the promotion as well as its nightly top draw. The consummate professional, Flair booked the promotion, dealt daily with WCW's bureaucracy and wrestled four to five star matches with Terry Funk.

While his initial run was successful, compared to today's standards almost fantastic, the pressures took their toll on him and by January his facial appearance was compared to Jimmy Carter's during the his last few months in office. Indeed, after a short period, Flair was made little more than a heat taker for the wrestlers while trying to force feed every idea he had to Jim Herd. With the exception of excellent television ratings, the results were less then successful. Flair resigned in February after booking the Clash of Champions where the Horsemen turned on Sting. The same card that lead to Sting's injury, Luger's subsequent face turn and a shot in the arm for the house show business.

Relieved from the pressure of being booker and allowed to just wrestle, Flair went on to have top notch matches with Lex Luger and nightly competed with the Midnight Express/Rock and Roll Express matches for best match on the card. Proving he was the best in the business, was not however, enough for WCW. They determined they wanted a new World Champion because their marketing studies showed Sting had more crossover appeal, particularly with children. But what did WCW expect? A wrestler who had been a heel for all but seven months of the past five years was unlikely to win many popularity contests. Being the best and one of the most charismatic in the business apparently meant little to WCW. After Luger refused to put Flair over at Capital Combat and Flair was not allowed to defeat an overweight, out of shape and untalented Junk Yard Dog, he finally dropped the strap to Sting in Sting's first official match back since his injury five months earlier. To say Flair's credibility had been damaged would be euphemistic. The last clean win he received on a major show was against Funk in November 1989. By July 1990 he appeared, to the casual fan, to be a shell of his former self, unable to beat an injured Luger, the Junk Yard Dog and defeated by Sting for the title during his comeback match.

The WCW bureaucracy was not satisfied, however, and spent the next six months doing everything possible the phase Flair down and out. His matches with Sting, while excellent had the same result: the Horsemen would run in, as would the Dudes With Attitudes and Sting would pin Flair clean. For Flair this wasn't unusual as he often put over wrestlers after they won World Title from him, however, this time the losses weren't used to build Flair back up, but to tear him down. In September, Flair and Luger wrestled an excellent match at the Clash of Champions where, judging by the crowd reaction, they, not Sting, were the star attractions of the promotion. But, as usual, the NWA was unwilling to accept the facts presented, no matter how crystal clear they were. Flair lost the match by disqualification, when Stan Hansen did a run in on Luger, and Flair disappeared into tag team competition with Arn Anderson.

While a competent, if not spectacular, tag team wrestler, Flair was clearly being taken away from the spotlight as his importance to the company was down played, despite his actual value. The feud between Arn Anderson/Flair and Doom was a good one, but Flair's role was ill-defined and he was out of place. A versatile wrestler in both singles and tag team competition? Yes, but the truth is Flair still belonged at the top. If he wasn't wrestling for the World Title, he should have been chasing the U.S. Title or involved in a solid singles feud. Instead he was delegated to tag team wrestling and performed admirably while WCW attempted to further diminish his credibility. Yet, for some reason, they were not satisfied.

Then came Starrcade '90. Flair, supposedly injured from an attack by Doom and Teddy Long's henchmen didn't appear until the main event where he was unveiled, after being beaten clean in the middle of the ring by Sting, as the Black Scorpion. What was an interesting angle at first, was turned into a complete failure by Ole Anderson's booking

and, undoubtedly, the braintrust in WCW. Flair, even with the element of mystery, was shown as incapable of defeating Sting. In the process, Flair had his hair cut and he began to show signs he was possibly like Samson. After phasing down Flair for five months, WCW realized he was their only hope as Sting's abortive reign was far from successful. In January 1991, Flair regained the World Championship to tie Harley Race's record of seven time NWA/WCW World Champion. Of course he was not allowed to pin Sting clean. In fact, his win was made to look more like an accident than a skilled veteran proving once again why he was the best in the business. But then, did anyone expect anything different from WCW?

Champion for the seventh time, albeit resembling Phil Donahue more than Ric Flair at times, many looked forward to another Flair title reign, if for nothing else, the possibility of excellent main events. Once again, however, the forces of WCW were at work to prevent their champion from having any credibility, or for that matter good matches. Flair's first challenge was El Gigante. Despite the big man's potential, his role as a championship contender was insulting at best. Flair was once again forced to carry an inferior wrestler, this time to matches that lasted 6 minutes with a disqualification loss for the champion while El Gigante looked dominate. After El Gigante, Flair and Scott Steiner had the match at the Clash that was labeled as a disappointment by most circles. Perhaps it was an off night or perhaps many were expecting too much, or a combination of the two. But with one match Steiner was no longer viewed as a singles contender and Flair was viewed as a man who could no longer bring out the best in his competition. While, both judgements were premature and without merit, they became solidified in many fans' minds. Flair began to be viewed as still the best, but a shell of his former self while Steiner has been considered nothing more than a hot tag team wrestler who isn't ready. These conclusions were based on one match and one match alone. They were made hastier than any of WCW's faulty reactionary booking. They were unfair, but many believe them to be true.

Now, after being pushed as the dirtiest player in the game, who can only hold onto the title by cheating, getting disqualified or outside interference, Flair is beginning to be viewed as a weak champion by the casual fans and buried one by the hardcores. Resultantly, he has, through no fault of his own, become ineffective. The exact result WCW has been searching for since 1989. Fans have become tired of seeing the best wrestler in the business get disqualified against Sting and Lex Luger. Flair's competition has become stale, his credibility damaged, his hair mangled and certainly his spirits must be down. Yet, somehow, he can still wrestle better than anyone in the business. The problem is, what does it mean? When people become apathetic, does it really matter how good you are? Of course the answer is yes, but it doesn't address the problem of what is happening to Flair's career. A problem that Flair must be trying to address everyday WCW insults him with a screw job finish, a match with El Gigante or contract manipulations.

There is speculation WCW will have Flair lose to Lex Luger at the Great American Bash and phase him out entirely. While entirely possible given the limitations of WCW's management, this would be the largest mistake made by the organization since it was purchased by Turner Broadcasting in 1988. It would be monumental and the final nail in WCW's proverbial coffin. The answer to WCW's problems is not to phase out its most consistent employee for the past 10 years, but rather, to address the inherent organizational problems that have lessened his effectiveness. Most importantly, they must present well thought out solutions to the problems surrounding their World Champion. Solutions designed, not for a quick short term gain, but for a long term future. WCW, however, has done little over the years to show any competence in long term and, for that matter, short term planning. But it is imperative the attempt to rectify this situation or the company will certainly fail.

Ric Flair has carried the NWA franchise since Jim Crockett turned it into a one company operation. Prior to that he carried Crockett's Mid-Atlantic promotion for years, while igniting other areas whenever he would appear as World Champion. The years of being

the franchise player, however, have taken their toll. Flair has suffered from over exposure, incompetent booking, stress, life on the road and he's had to juggle his personal life in the process. At 41, he has finally shown signs that he may need a rest, even if just a short one to get the fire back. Perhaps, just perhaps, Flair should lose the belt to Luger at the Great American Bash and take some time off to recuperate from all the abuse his body and mind must have taken over the years. Perhaps, just perhaps, he should be given the chance to rest and be taken out of the spotlight for a month or two. Perhaps, it would help. Perhaps the opportunity to relax, spend time at home and grow out his hair would contribute to Flair making a return possibly rivaling his 1989 Summer comeback. 1989 proved to be Flair's best year, albeit with opponents like Ricky Steamboat and Terry Funk. Still, the rest helped immensely and Flair drew crowds and ratings that would be envied today. Then of course, there were the classic matches. If Flair were given the chance to take same time off and given a solid comeback complete, with a push to successfully eclipse the record he shares with Harley Race, Flair would provide fantastic matches, heat, crowds, ratings and money. He could also show why he is not only the best, but why he is so far above everyone else.

Regrettably, WCW has been unable to see Flair has been the only wrestler who has consistently brought in money. After doing everything they could to diminish his importance they are now criticizing his drawing power. However, not one WCW wrestler has ever outdrawn Ric Flair. Further, until the company starts to properly groom a successor, no WCW wrestler ever will. Since WCW has been unable or unwilling to develop talent, they must fully utilize the best talent they have. This involves properly using the best wrestler in the business. A necessity, regardless of politics. Regardless of personal opinions. Regardless of anything but the fact that Flair is the franchise and the only wrestler with the potential to make the organization successful.

The final part of this elaborate labyrinth called WCW, is Ric Flair the man. Constantly berated by management, often perceived by many as a second class wrestler because of booking and the organization he works for, the past few years must have been extremely difficult for Flair. Many have criticized the decline in the quality of Flair's matches citing redundant competition, his somewhat repetitive style, the finishes he rarely had any control over and inferior opponents. However, Flair has taken so much abuse over the past two years the fact he still has the drive to wrestle is nothing short of remarkable. The fact he remains, to this day, the absolute best in the profession requires a thesaurus full of superlatives. How many of us, if we went through what Flair has for the past two years would still be working in the same business, let alone for the same employer? The answer is probably equal to the number of wrestlers in Ric Flair's class. I do not pretend to know what motivates Ric Flair and why he is still in this profession. But, despite not knowing the man, I can safely say Ric Flair is at a point in his career where it is time to reflect about the past and decide upon the future. There are so many variables beyond his control that have created this situation, it must be almost impossible for Flair to objectively it. If allowed, Flair could have another 1989. He could also unjustifiably be buried. Flair can control a number of things, but he can't control a company he doesn't own. To make matters worse, until that company is willing to see his value, the fact that he is their biggest asset, there is little he can do to change his future without leaving the organization. What does Ric Flair want for the future? My guess is he wants to give the audience the best he has to offer, fulfil his potential as the best wrestler in the game and finally get the recognition he deserves from management and the public. The tragedy is as long as he works for WCW, or even if he were to jump to the WWF, he never will. That is not only a tragedy, it's a crime.

Letters To The Editors

I really enjoyed the April/May issue of WP. The Tommy Young interview was excellent. His condition (as well as what he's been up to) has always been one of those questions that I ask myself every so often. Now I know. You have to feel bad for a guy like that, after all how many referees get standing ovations like Tommy did in New Haven a few years

back?

In regards to the Phantom's assessment of so-called "smart fans," in some respects I tend to agree with the sentiment that being "smart" is silly. Once you begin to know more about the business, professional wrestling can become a real turnoff. The casual fan can tell who is a good worker and who is not. Before I began reading *The Observer*, I knew that Ric Flair was royalty. I always thought Bobby Eaton was being held back and would never get the big push because he was a bad interview. Ricky Steamboat was my favorite wrestler. I could go on. The point is that if a fan wants to get caught up in gimmicks, he will. Fans in a Utopian situation, would cheer for the athletics involved, instead of the face-paint and mascots. Education is needed, but the word education denotes something highbrow. I took algebra five or six times in my life, but I still don't get it. You can't teach something to someone who has already closed their mind.

The superiority felt over the "marks" by the "smart" fans is utterly bizarre. It's like when we were little kids when our friends would brag about having something we didn't want. People just don't care, the same way we don't worry about the back stage happenings at a soap opera.

Lastly, let me relay the following story. A friend and I attended the Titan Survivor Series show in November at the Hartford Civic Center. We were sitting in the cheap seats with an entire row full of little kids in front of us. A few seats down, an obnoxious "smart fan" was giving finishes and ruining the illusion (good vs. evil) for the kids by telling them who travels with who, who is related, etc. The kids were stimulated by this at first, but the attraction quickly disappeared. Suffice to say, they ended up having a horrible time. One little Warrior had met his hero at a restaurant earlier that evening and was as happy as he would be if he found a cure cancer. This "smart" guy flew into a near stand-up routine about the Warrior, knocking Jim Hellwig for everything from World War II to the missing Nixon tapes. I honestly believed that the little guy would have been crying if all of his buddies weren't around.

Pick your sports, smart fans. Save your knowledge for those who enjoy being "in the know." Just because we have certain facts not privy to the general public doesn't mean we have to string them from the highest tree.

Bill Strong
Bristol, CT

The Phantom of The Ring seems to have an opinion of we so-called "smart fans" that is the extreme opposite as that held by non-fans. I do not like the term because it seems to imply so many things. Also, some "smart fans" don't seem to be so "smart." Myself, I'm just a fan who has more information than most, probably less than others. However, the Phantom seemed to imply that we are all like the stereotype he wrote about. Well, I'm sorry to say that I don't fit that categorization.

I have several friends who are fans and "marks" in every sense of the word. Yet, I still associate with them, talk wrestling, invite them to my home to watch tapes and to attend matches with me. I try to impart some of what I've learned to them, some of which takes and some of it doesn't. In any case, I don't dread talking with "marks." Most of them would like to see the same changes we "smart fans" want.

I have never been embarrassed to be a wrestling fan. Sure, I suffer through my share of ridicule from non-fans, but who among us hasn't. My father has been a fan since the early 1950s. We always watched matches and TV and attended cards in St. Louis. He was pretty hip to what was going on and how it was done, so I learned early to respect wrestlers for their talent and toughness. Why would I be embarrassed by something that I was raised watching?

What is wrong with using wrestlers' terminology? Since I have some knowledge of the business, I find it quite natural to use its terminology in discussing it with other "smart fans." I don't generally use any of the lingo when talking to "marks" because they wouldn't have any idea what I was saying. I don't generally use the terminology from my job when talking to my friends for the same reason.

I imagine most wrestling fans have wanted to be "in the game" at one time or another, probably including the Phantom himself. What does being a "smart fan" have to do with that? Also, I would enjoy meeting some of my favorite wrestlers but that doesn't mean I'm going to invite them over for dinner. I guess that depends on if you have the groupie" mentality or not.

Being a "smart fan" has increased my enjoyment of wrestling and my respect for the people involved. It has also made me aware of, and given me the chance to meet, other people who love wrestling as much as I do. Perhaps the Phantom is like some of the people in the business who fear that their "secret society" is being invaded and ruined by so many of us knowing the truth. It sure hasn't hurt the business in Japan.

Michael McGowen
Jerseyville, IL

P&D - Wade Keller has suggested the term "smart fans" should be replaced by "hardcore fans" as it is a more accurate, less pretentious term. We agree and will use that term from now on.

Congratulations Dave & Elise

I'd like to take this space to congratulate to David and his beautiful bride Elise who were married in a lovely ceremony on June 22, 1991. Best of luck and my best wishes - Paul

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